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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview of library statistics as they relate to the value of library services. The first section reviews the Australian national think tank on library statistics, held in 1990. The second section examines the overall state of library statistics in Australia, focusing on deficiencies related to the lack of a central collection and/or repository of current statistics and the lack of nationally agreed performance measures for libraries. The third section considers how well library statistics have been used for demonstration of libraries as best value investments by society, educational institutions, governments, and businesses. The fourth section specifies areas requiring attention if libraries are to reinforce their claims on better funding and support in the 21st century. (MES)

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# Best Value: Libraries

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By: Alan Bundy

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# Proceedings

## *Best value: Libraries*

***Alan Bundy***

This overview has four parts. The first reviews the only national think tank on library statistics[1], held in September 1990 - just ten years ago. The second examines the overall state of library statistics in Australia. The third considers how well library statistics have been used for demonstration of libraries as best value investments by society, educational institutions, governments and businesses. Finally, areas requiring attention if libraries are to reinforce their claims on better funding and support in the 21st century are specified.

The premise behind these explorations are that library statistics have two essential purposes

- for effective management and benchmarking
- for local, state and national advocacy for investment in libraries to enable them to make an even better contribution to society and the economy

It is also a premise that libraries can no longer concern themselves just with their industry statistics to sustain the case for better funding. They need to contextualise - to be aware of, and use, data relating to the information society, and where data is lacking initiate its collection.

## The national think tank on library statistics

The origin of the only national think tank on library statistics ever held was the involvement of libraries in the work of the statistical advisory group created by the Council of Cultural Ministers to develop a statistical framework for the culture/leisure industry in Australia. Held before the 1990 Perth ALIA biennial conference, thirteen papers were presented. The introduction to the proceedings noted

> . . . there has been no shortage of activity and interest in the topic in Australian librarianship. Yet it is quite clear that there is no single database to which we can turn in Australia, which will report each indicator consistently for each library for sufficient years to sustain any analysis of trends. It may well be questioned why the absence of something should be used as the basis for creating it. Where is the demand? Who would use it? What purpose would it serve? What value would justify its cost?[2]

Ten years on, these points, and these questions, remain valid.

The pithy introduction, by Andy Exon and Kerry Smith, also observed that the economic climate meant that librarians were faced with the challenge of not simply reporting statistics, but of demonstrating their value to the organisation as a whole. It noted 'The fact that these organisations can have difficulty justifying themselves is no excuse for us to turn our backs on our own ability to do just that'.[3]

Very perceptively, Exon and Smith concluded

> All that is needed is an understanding of the importance of the problem, conviction of the justice of the case, and dedication to the faithful collection and distribution of the product.
>
> Once that has been achieved, we have sufficient expertise to move to the next level of activity - the development of an understanding of the relationship between the

> indicators of library activity and the performance of the organisations which support us.[4]

The papers ranged considerably in their focus. Some were more pointed than others. Geoff Allen in 'What's right or wrong with library statistics?' warned about the

> . . . danger of deluding ourselves, and therefore others, of the value of our statistics, and - the ABS is little better - I am sure Unesco is worse. But - we have no choice but to go on counting, because I see no alternative approach to getting some meaningful handle on library productivity, or enabling interlibrary comparisons which will inevitably continue to be demanded.[5]

In a short paper at the end of the published volume, Ian Douglas observed that

> The word 'statistics' is etymologically associated with the word 'statist', a person skilled in state affairs. Despite the enormous power of modern mathematical statistics to extract meaning from data, the basic point in collecting statistics is still to assist in the craft of running the state, or in our case, libraries.
>
> There are four aspects of collecting statistics that should be paramount
>
> - the data should bear on important problems facing the state (in our context the state of libraries)
> - the data should be useful in determining courses of action
> - the data should be reliably collectable
> - the data should be unambiguous
>
> If these criteria are applied to a collation of statistics from all libraries, then criteria 3 and 4 will restrict the scope of the statistics to a very basic set relating to loans, holdings, staffing and expenditure.[6]

This is a commonsense observation which still applies. If more than a basic set of statistics is required, they have to be collected and reported on a sectoral basis.

## Australian library statistics at the end of the 20th Century

In March 2000 Averill Edwards, former ALIA president, completed a project for the Australian Library and Information Association to identify 'currently available statistics on libraries; librarians and library activities across all sectors'.[7] Also reviewed for comparison were the main statistical resources from Canada, New Zealand, UK and the USA. Nearly 50 sources of Australian data were identified. Nonetheless Edwards concluded that

> . . . in truth the library industry in Australia is poorly provided for in statistics. Basic statistics like the number of libraries and the number of librarians in Australia can only be estimated - more detailed operational statistics are available for some libraries in some sectors in some states for some periods -
>
> Libraries are a significant part of Australian cultural and intellectual life and yet so little information on the operations of the library industry is known. Good statistics are important not only to the good management of libraries but are important to those outside the sector - politicians, sponsors, the user community. Statistical information is necessary to formulate sound policy advice, to analyse and predict trends, to monitor performance, to market effectively and to seek funding successfully. There is no adequate long term picture of the industry which would assist in better management but also assist it to lobby more effectively.

Some of the key deficiencies identified in the report are

*No central collection and/or repository of current statistics on library industry statistics which is easily and publicly available*

- current collections are scattered by state or territory or by sector and now by format - print, electronic
- inefficient to have so many different collecting bodies
- current collections are difficult to compare as often only the current year or two years' statistics are provided
- not consistent as there are few standard definitions of specific operations across or within sectors eg reference inquiries
- difficult to compare as local requirements force different ranges of statistics to be collected within the one sector
- not current - most statistics are at least two years old or older
- few substantial statistical sequences covering ten years or more which can be used to indicate trends
- wide differences in categories of statistics collected within sectors and across sectors

*No nationally agreed performance measures for libraries, although some attempts have been made to do so within sectors*

- no ratings index by which to judge how well the library is operating
- an overall decline in collection of statistics
- decline in public availability of library statistics
- large research libraries are adopting accrual accounting and produce annual reports similar to company reports with detailed financial records but little operational data
- absorption of libraries within larger government departments with reporting forced to follow the departmental format
- no detailed central listing of libraries by sector, including school libraries
- lack of electronic statistics
- lack of inlibrary use statistics
- lack of employment statistics
- lack of school library statistics

## Are existing statistics well used?

Edward's report shows that by international comparison, and despite its advantage of a relatively small population, Australia has not done particularly well. Certainly the UK, with the Library and Information Statistics Unit at Loughborough University, and the US with its National Center for Education Statistics *Library Statistics Cooperative program*, are both ahead of Australia. Canada, more comparable to Australia in population, has had a National Core Library Statistics program funded by its National Library since 1994.

Yet a fundamental issue remains that there is no value in clutching at statistical straws - expending resources collecting statistics - unless they are put to use. This is something which Australia, university libraries perhaps aside, has generally failed to do.

## The Hennen Index

One public librarian in the US has shown that this is not just an Australian failing. In the process he

has highlighted the correlated need for better library standards, with a strong quantitative as well as a qualitative basis.

Thomas Hennen Jnr, Director of the Waukeshe County Federated Library System in Wisconsin, has developed an index using six input and nine output measures focused on largely unused data collected for many years by the US Department of Education. In doing so he has created considerable library publicity and professional debate in the US. Hennen, who I had the pleasure of spending time with earlier this year in Chicago, believes that libraries have always lacked any commonly accepted indicators of what excellence is, something his index is designed to address.[8] Canadian applied research backs up Hennen. 'Knowing how we compare to the other libraries - whether we're providing the right level of service - is important to Council'.[9]

This Canadian research also observes that the target audience for public librarians - elected members and senior council administrators - are much more interested in the library's contribution to the local area than the broader social or national goals.

Hennen's initiative was inspired by US ratings of everything from cities to hospitals to universities. *Money magazine's* 1998 annual report on the 'Best places to live in America' uses *library books per capita* as one of its 89 indicators, but books have not been the sole measure of a library for many years. The outcome of Hennen's work has irritated a few, benefited the best and profited the worst. As he notes

> The media coverage has been very positive and very helpful to many of the well ranked libraries - Library representatives found uses for the poor scores, as well. Librarians lobbying for added state funding in the State of Georgia used their poor Haplr index rankings as part of their campaign strategy. Other local libraries have used the down side of their rankings to similar effect[10]

Hennen asked the question, can existing US public library statistics be used to more effect? It is a question we should ask in Australia before attempting a response to the myriad issues raised in Edwards' project report. In response to that question, using existing data an index of excellence is possible for university libraries, for public libraries, for state libraries and possibly for TAFE libraries. Special libraries are more problematic but within categories such as health libraries and law libraries maybe less so.

## School libraries

Where it would be quite impossible to construct any index is school libraries, by far the most numerous type of library in Australia and arguably, with public libraries, the most important in determining the attitudes of future decision makers to library investment. This is a longstanding deficiency. Ten years ago it was noted that

> There is a pitifully poor supply of statistics available on school libraries. Jim Dwyer, former Superintendent of Studies, Education Department of South Australia, made a valiant attempt to better the situation by undertaking to call it school library statistics on a national basis for the years 1983, 1984 and 1985 -
>
> There is no co-ordinated collection of library statistics for private shools[11]

It appears, from Edward's survey, that only the Catholic system in Australia has good school library statistics. Given the importance of teacher librarians and school library resource centres to effective student learning, literacy and information literacy, this is a national disgrace. It suggests

- teacher librarians themselves are not being proactive individually and collectively about the issue, and benchmarking in particular
  *or*
- school systems and individual schools are too embarrassed to reveal the level of support of their libraries

*or*

- they do not see the contribution of teacher librarians and library resource centres as central to teaching and learning

*or*

- they are not willing to be publicly accountable for expenditure of public funds, in both state and private schools

## The need for national audits

Why should it be, for example, that it is fairly easy to identify what percentage of a university or municipality budget is invested in its library service, but quite impossible to do the same for the overwhelming majority of school libraries? There is clearly need of strong co-operation between ALIA and ASLA in pressing the issue as a national priority, and soon. An audit of school libraries would, at minimum, make them a national educational focus, where at present they are not.

Also primarily an issue for ALIA is making the best communication use of figures which might be gained from a 'beginning of the century' audit of the other national library sectors. No government or other agency is likely to initiate such audits, yet the outcomes would be invaluable for library profile raising. For example, I have recently carried out a very simple and inexpensive survey of public libraries in Australia which show the following results for overall facilities compared with a similar survey in Finland, a country with annual loans per capita of 22 compared with 9 in Australia, and which is regarded as a public library leader.

**Australia/Finland**

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The survey responses were from Australian public library managers and derive from a 35 per cent response. Yet they are statistically valid. To get the message through to the Australian community, we need simple data like this, and messages such as

> 'Public libraries - your 6c per day best investment'
> 'Public libraries - supported by 95% of Australians
> 'Public libraries - used by 60% of Australians
> 'Public libraries - local government's most appreciated service'

It is this type of message which - over a period of time - sticks in the individual and collective mind of individuals and decision makers.

Statistics can be used with imagination and to stimulate awareness. To date this has been largely overlooked in Australia. The Canadians have done it better.[12]

## Going forward to basics - quantitative standards

Hennen has connected his index with the issue of standards. He contends that we need to reverse the trend in the last decade or so to loosely defined qualitative standards. This is in part because they have little value in the political bargaining arena. For 'America' in the following quotation 'Australia' could well be substituted, as could 'ALIA' for 'ALA'.

> A critical question to ask is who will define new standards? Until 1966, the American Library Association (ALA) took an active role in setting standards. Since then, ALA has concentrated on variations on planning and encouraging libraries to set their own standards. Individual state library agencies assisted by state library associations have taken on the job. Who should take the lead in setting new standards? ALA would be the most appropriate in this writer's opinion.
>
> *We need to go forward to basics.* We should have national minimum standards for all public libraries in America. We need national advisory standards that all libraries should strive for though only some will reach. Most of all we need benchmarks of excellence for exceptional libraries so that the rest can learn from the best. The Public Library Association should begin the process immediately.
>
> Setting locally needed standards, as in the current ALA *Planning for results* process is, of course, to be encouraged. Accounting has Generally Accepted Accounting Principles (GAAP). Public libraries need minimum standards that any American can expect in any library. Beyond that we need Generally Accepted Library Procedures (GALP?). Private businesses of all types are reaching for excellence using Benchmarking and Best Practices methodologies. It is time for public libraries to do the same.
>
> The profession should set minimum standards for libraries. Let us compete for excellence by exceeding minimums, then exceeding targets, and finally soaring to total quality library service. When libraries soar this high, let's go forward to basics, and award excellence.[14]

A recent UK publication on public libraries has made a similar point

> In the absence, for now, of an Office of Library Regulation, it is surely time the library profession set national benchmarks for the nature, extent and quality of services.

## Qualitative standards

Libraries, because of the wonderful, complex, multifaceted physical and virtual places they are, do

face a challenge greater than any other institution in society in measuring and conveying the full extent of what they do and contribute. This should be with the sense that the ambiguity of most types of libraries is *not* old fashioned and problematic, although it does affront simple minded, faddish, concepts such as core business and niche marketing. The core business of libraries is people and their intellectual needs. We should therefore see, and promote, such ambiguity as the stuff of a liberating 21st century.

Long standing library data collection, like loan statistics, has never been more than a limited relative indicator. It is noteworthy that Robert Cannon, Executive Director of the Charlotte and Meckleberg County Public Library in North Carolina is no longer publicising loan statistics at all. Inlibrary use of libraries - which is increasing - has never been measured well. Inlibrary and virtual use of electronic resources is now very problematic in terms of meaningful measurement. Not surprisingly, the introduction of the draft review to ISO/CD2789 *International library statistics* notes that 'As regards electronic resources and networks some measures are specified in this standard as targets to be aimed at where their actual compilation may not be generally feasible at this time'.[15] The draft standard itself has pages devoted to the complex issues of electronic data collection, one of which issues being that vendors, suppliers, IT centres and library consortium may be involved.

In contradistinction to the need for overt quantitative standards, more qualitative assessment of what libraries mean to individuals and different communities is also needed. The outcome of this qualitative assessment can be very effective if used proactively in the political debate - libraries have tended, like other agencies in society, to be compliant with the dominant proposition that if something cannot be readily counted it is not worthwhile. More qualitative research, of the type undertaken in the UK in 1998 as *New measures for the new library*[16] shows the way forward, slow though that way may be.

Using a social audit technique this research found very positive data about

- The social role of the public library
- The sense of ownership that communities express for their library service
- The educational role of the library
- The economic impact of the library
- Its impact on reading and literacy
- Its part in developing community identity and confidence
- Equity in service delivery

A new measurement strategy initiated by the Colorado State Library and being used already by 40 libraries throughout the US is outcome based evaluation - asking users about the outcome of their visit to the library.[17]

## Best value

Data collection, regardless of all the statistics which library management systems can, and do generate, is an organisational cost. The reality is that most of the existing Australian library industry statistics, and statistics generated at the library level, are not used systematically for improved management or advocacy. If they are used at all, the use is opportunistic and ad hoc. That statement can be made without fear of verifiable contradiction because, ironically, there is little in the way of statistical or other evidence to confirm the uses to which library statistics are put, and what the outcomes of that usage are. Too little analytical rigor has been applied to what type of statistics are collected - subjective impressions of what might be useful one day have dominated, but without much reference to data bearing on important problems facing libraries.

Apart from the local drivers there are two predicable national organisational drivers which will impact on many Australian libraries in the early part of the next - the 21st - century. These drivers

should improve the direction of Australian library industry data collection.

One of these drivers is Best Value, a UK concept which has already been taken up in Victoria.

In England, local authorities will be embarking on a program of 'Best value reviews' of all of their services. Once an authority has carried out a review, it will be inspected by the Audit Commission to judge the quality of the service and whether the service will improve as a result.[18]

A similar concept is that of quality assurance which in Australia will soon start to apply to the universities through the Quality Agency. Like the Best Value inspection, the essence of the work of this agency will be to verify that the reality matches the rhetoric of the universities.

'Best value' and 'quality assurance' processes are both something from which libraries can benefit because they tend to lead their institutions in both. The issue then becomes what statistics and performance and benefit measures are required to sustain their case for better recognition of their value and contribution.

In other words, statistical data collection for libraries has to be focused strongly towards an end benefit. ALIA will need to lead in the identification and collection of statistics but only those which relate directly to the attainment of its five objects which, let us remind ourselves constantly, are

1. To promote the free flow of information and ideas in the interest of all Australians and a thriving culture, economy and democracy
2. To promote and improve the services provided by all kinds of library and information agencies
3. To ensure the high standard of personnel engaged in information provision and foster their professional interests and aspirations
4. To represent the interests of members to governments, other organisations and the community
5. To encourage people to contribute to the improvement of library and information services through support and membership of the Association

Just as it is easy to spoil a written presentation with too many fonts, it is potentially all too easy to gather statistics which will not have any real use. If a philosophy is to underpin the type of statistics to be collected it should be 'if in doubt, don't'. The opposite has often applied, so the critical question with aggregated sectoral, state or national compilations which must be answered is, will the statistics really

- help libraries and the profession perform and demonstrate performance?
- be usable to advance the case for more, and better funded, libraries?

Identifying the core statistics to meet these requirements will not be easy but it is a challenge which can be deferred no longer. Ten years ago, at that national think tank, Barry McIntyre asked the question

> In the light of these problems that have resisted various attempts to provide remedies, it is worth contemplating should anything really be done about the statistics problem?

His response to his own question was

> It is time to resolve what really needs to be done and do it even if that means leaving things as they are! Let's put the statistics issue that has plagued every conference for the last ten years to rest.[19]

His plea clearly went unanswered. Here we are ten years later, still trying to find a way forward.

## Conclusion

Earlier it was noted that statistics can be used with imagination, and to good political effect.

One ALIA action, hinted at by Barry McIntyre at the national think tank, should be the production of a regular Australian Library Facts Book.

Another ALIA action should be 2001 national think tank on library and contextual statistics, standards and audits, with a required outcome to either put the issues to rest, or more positively to carry them forward with targeted, cost effective, and sustainable recommendations. This should be in informed by, in particular, a joint ALIA/ASLA paper on school library statistics and standards.

The 21st century information society - as people, government and business become increasingly disenchanted with information overload or information deprivation - should be a golden age for libraries as both place and space. The more a country has equity of access to information that is relevant and focused to its socioeconomic and democratic development the more enduringly successful it will be - Finland is one example. Singapore is following hard on its heels.

Libraries and librarians are the experts in the management and free flow of information. The more of both a country has, the more chances it will have of getting its information better recognised and more accessible. That is the very simple proposition which needs to be developed as the new century develops. The identification and astute use of the right statistics and standards is critical to the success of that proposition.

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